DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 225 186 CS 207 339

AUTHOR Parker, Daniel E.
TITLE Poetry or Propaganda? Relating Reason to Emotion in the Classroom.
PUB DATE Oct 82
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Meeting of the North Idaho Council of English (Coeur d'Alene, ID, October 15-16, 1982).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Emotional Response; English Instruction; *Expressive Language; Language Usage; *Persuasive Discourse; *Poetry; *Propaganda; Rhetoric

ABSTRACT

In the name of responsible argument, persuasive rhetoric need not eschew all the devices used by propaganda. Emotion is not only inevitable in discourse, it is the necessary base for action. Educators should not consider propaganda evil for the very reason they consider poetry good: its emotional power. This kind of thinking creates a specious distinction between literature and life. Poetry and propaganda differ more in the ends they seek than the means they use. Emotion is part of life and part of language. The attempt to remove it is as absurd as it is futile. (JL)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION
CENTER (ERIC)

X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

ED225186

POETRY OR PROPAGANDA?

Relating Reason to Emotion in the Classroom

Daniel E. Parker

Lewis-Clark State College

Lewiston, Idaho 83501

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Daniel E. Parker

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

CS207339

At a recent NCTE conference presentation, The Odyssey was used to characterize rhetorical devices that disrupted clear thinking. For instance, lotus eaters represented the use of sound effects such as rhythm and alliteration that might hypnotize an audience and thus make them receptive to irrational persuasions. The Aeolus episode (as I recall) represented the dangers of allusive overtones. And so on.[1]

It is undeniable that, like poetry, propaganda uses rhetorical devices that may weaken one's critical faculties. But this does not mean that persuasive rhetoric should eschew all such devices in the name of responsible argument. Language inevitably has rhythmic and other evocative powers, as the doctrine of psychological tone posits. We hear in our mind's ear how a discourse sounds, and interpret from that tone the attitude of the writer toward his subject and his audience. Whether we adjudge the tone to be placid, passionate, or puerile, we acknowledge an emotional effect.

Since language inevitably evokes emotion, the issue is to modulate the emotion so that it is proportionate and complementary to the reasoning and the purpose of the discourse. English teachers (above all) should realize that modulation rather than suppression of emotion is necessary no matter what the rhetorical situation. Otherwise they will find themselves denouncing in a composition class effects they have praised in a literature class, a very contradictory experience for students.

The NCTE presenter used Martin Luther King's "I have a Dream" as an example of rhetorical irresponsibility. A brief passage exemplifies its rhythmic and allusive strategies:

> Now is the time to rise from the dark and desolate valley of segregation to the sunlit path of racial justice. Now is the time to lift our nation from the quicksands of racial injustice to the solid rock of brotherhood. Now is the time to make justice a reality for all God's children.

The words and phrases, the alliteration, and the climactic rhythm that intensifies the call to righteousness, all remind us of the Bible. "Desolate," for instance, is a frequent Biblical word. "Path of racial justice" evokes the pattern of Biblical paths to be made straight.

King's use of Biblical allusion reminds us of his basic assumptions: a Christian call to brotherhood is obligatory by commandment of the God who can make disobedient lands desolate and waste, and by the love of the God who can provide nations as well as individuals salvation. He clearly intends us to believe, and is not disguising the bases on which he urges racial justice, those of divine punishment and reward. The Biblical parody is complementary to his argument.

If one were arguing from the standpoint of Camus' existential humanism, he would presumably avoid the Biblical web of emotion and spin another out of the myth of Sysyphus and the glory of being humane in an absurd universe. The effort would still be to generate a <u>feeling</u> for racial justice, to stimulate the quest for it as a response to life's idiocies and frustrations.

Just as emotion is inevitable in discourse, it is a necessary base for action. But as the following passage from an English handbook illustrates, it is too easily taken as a sign of dishonesty:

> People use a number of handy fallacies in order to sidestep a problem while appearing to pursue the point. One of the most effective--and most underhanded--involves playing on

the emotional reactions, prejudices, fears, and ignorance of your readers instead of directly addressing the issue.

> If we want a society of people who devote their time to base and sensuous things, then pornography may be harmless. But if we want a society in which the noble side is encouraged and mankind itself is elevated, then I submit that pornography is surely harmful.
>
> --John Mitchell[2]

Why (except for the fact that a Watergater said it) are we to disapprove? What ignorance is being appealed to? What prejudices? Is it prejudicial to disapprove of pornography in general?--no more so than to disapprove of murder in general, or gambling in general! All these positions are a priori. Why do the writers suppose that Mitchell is deviously manipulating others' emotions rather than sharing his own?

The myth of man as a rational machine carries its own emotional freight. The handbook writers obviously dislike Mitchell's use of evocative language--"base and sensuous," "noble,"elevated." They are probably out of sympathy with the victorian assumptions behind the statement. But they have not shown that it begs any questions. Wherein the baseness of "base and sensuous" lies is indeed a crux, but there is nothing irrational or underhanded in asserting that some writing is of that type.

The effort to be purely logical and linear in one's thinking and writing is to chase an illusion. It is to deny the very structure of our minds as revealed by brain research. Those who most nearly approximate the ideal of pure rationalism are persons who have suffered the

loss of the right hemispheres of their brains. Their use of language is "basically unimpaired but somewhat computerlike. While the precise literal meaning of words is understood perfectly, metaphor, inflection, and emotional tone are not. Personality, insight, imagination, and initiative also suffer greatly."[3]

If they are not emotionally responsive, how can they have initiative? Etymologically, emotion means to move out. King wanted people to move out to overthrow a disgraceful social pattern. All persuasion is designed to make us move out from our status quo. As human beings we are designed to care, and it is the job of persuaders to excite our caring to the point of action. They do so by means of what we may call poetry, a fusing of reason and emotion in language. But if this fusion is not based on complementarity of reason and emotion we are likely to label it with the pejorative term propaganda.

Propaganda viewed neutrally is propagation of a faith by means fair or foul. We should not consider propaganda to be evil for the very reason we consider poetry to be good: its emotional power. If we think this way we make a specious distinction between literature and life, the purpose of literature being to exhaust us emotionally so that we can be unemotionally rational in life--the old stoic catharsis.

This cast of mind not only poisons the study of literature as a criticism of life, it also oversimplifies the study of propaganda.

> A common underlying philosophy has been: Arm the kids with a list of propaganda techniques with catchy names, prove to them that those are bad things done by bad people out to get their money or their votes, and then move on....(This) perpetuates a falsehood about communication (only bad people manipulate language for their own ends), and it prevents students

from applying the language skills we teach all year to the areas where they most need them.[4]

Assessing the complementarity of reason and emotion is better than opposing literature and life or emotion and reason in determining the appropriateness of a discourse--whether it be labeled poem, persuasion, or propaganda piece.

Clearly propagandistic language may fuse reason and emotion appropriately. Consider this slogan-poem from a peasants' revolt of Fourteenth century England:

When Adam delved and Eve span,
Who was then a gentleman?

The rhetorical strategy of the slogan is evident. The statement is compact, emphatic, shocking, memorable, and by implication a call to action. Etymologically, slogan means war cry,[5] and one can envision peasants chanting this as they sacked gentlemen's estates. The poem is nonetheless deliberative rhetoric, reasoning about the future through an observation about the human condition. The couplet implies that we are all equally human, and that social distinctions to the contrary should be eliminated. The jeering tone may seem regrettable, but it is not irrational as a device to develop solidarity against oppressors.

We might object to such a poem on the basis that it oversimplifies and encourages violence with its harsh tone. another example, from the beginning of our century, may better clarify the legitimacy of emotion as a basic element of persuasion:

The golf links lie so near the mill
That almost everyday

The laboring children can look out
And see the men at play.

--Sarah N. Cleghorn

If we were among the golfers of those days (or these days?), think of how many ways in which we could object to the unfairness and illogic of this poem:

1. It oversimplifies.

2. It stereotypes.

3. It uses role reversal to imply that men are childish; but we all know that recreation is necessary for adults as well as children. (We had better glide over "as well as" hurriedly!)

All the objections have degrees of validity, but fail to undermine the basic ironic force of the poem. If one were to rewrite the piece including all qualifiers, however, one would destroy the rhetorical efficiency of the piece--its emotional force--and the reader might very well sink back into a lethargy of "informed" impotence. Better that we learn the wisdom of the emotion, the irony, of the message as it stands than smother it in computerlike rationalization.

Propaganda in the bad sense is easily enough illustrated by means of advertising slogans. That lovely song desecrated by CocaCola will serve as an example:

I'd like to teach the world to sing
In perfect harmony;
I'd like to buy the world a coke
To keep it company.

The effort here is to associate the product with the expression of a youthful desire for peace and friendship. Would it be all right if milk or orange juice were being hawked? Would you rather have a

Democrat or a Republican associated with peace and friendship? These questions indicate how mechanistic the effort is to associate one's product--good or bad--with something appealing. Unlike the poems we have been looking at, there is no organicity among the elements: the associating of coke with the peace sentiment is a patchwork job. And it is not so much pure reason as our sense of taste that tells us so.

We could make the coke ad sound a lot more responsible than the child labor poem. Opposition to child labor leads to increased costs of production, higher prices, more juvenile delinquency, exportation of jobs to countries that have no such laws. Coke drinking, on the other hand, results in more jobs, especially for dentists, sugar cane workers, fat farm employees, the makers of sleeping pills, etc.

The difference remains that the coke ad draws a specious relationship between product and sentiment, whereas the golf links poem makes a connection that is not arbitrary and shallow.

A complaint against all of these short examples could be that they are lacking in the "necessary"qualities of argument: sufficiency of support data, establishment of data relevance, completeness of perspective, fairness of interpretation, and appropriate qualifiers.[6] Indeed such balanced assessments of argument are important, but it is neither realistic nor desirable to confine all argument to such comprehensive modes. We get our input fragmentarily--twenty seconds of videotape, a bumper sticker, a tangential article in a magazine, an application from last Sunday's sermon. Our insignts and ideas do not come out of whole cloth either, and we cannot keep silent until everything jells, or we will never find out how to interpret the data or control the insights or modulate the emotions. Alas, life is a rough draft.

Since we are not computers, although a portion of our brain is computerlike, we never think with pure disinterest. What we care about and what we hope for, tempered by our sense of reality and our critical discipline, must always be a part of our mental structure. Only by emotion do we know what we care about and what we want or fear. To cut the emotional, the sensuous, the poetic out of language suggests an academic ideal as absurd as that of Mr. Gradgrind in Dickens' Hard Times:

> "I'll explain to you, then, . . . why you wouldn't paper a room with representations of horses. Do you ever see horses walking up and down the sides of rooms in reality--in fact? Do you?"
>
> "Yes, sir!" from one half. "No, sir!" from the other.
>
> "Of course, No," said the gentleman, with an indignant look at the wrong half. "Why, then, you are not to see anywhere what you don't see in fact; you are not to have anywhere what you don't have in fact. What is called Taste is only another name for Fact."
>
> --Chapter Two, "Murdering the Innocents"

NOTES

[1]Margaret Scarborough, "A Rhetorical Odyssey or Cleaning Up Foggy Thinking in High School and College Discourse," Northwest Regional Conference of the National Council of Teachers of English, Boise, Idaho, April 23, 1982.

[2]Elizabeth McMahon and Susan Day, The Writer's Handbook (New York: McGaw-Hill, 1980), p. 135.

[3]Thomas R. Blakeslee, The Right Brain: A New Understanding of the Unconscious Mind and its Creative Powers (Garden City, New York: Anchor Press Doubleday, 1980), pp. 17-18.

[4]Nancy McCrackon, "A Student-Centered, Process-Oriented, Interdisciplinary Non-Unit on Doublespeak," in Teaching About Doublespeak, ed. Daniel Dieterich (Urbana, Illinois: NCTE, 1976), pp. 135-136.

[5]Robert E. Denton, Jr., "The Rhetorical Functions of Slogans: Classifications and Characteristics," Communication Quarterly, Spring 1980, p. 11.

[6]Scarborough